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THE LESSONS OF THE WUO: HISTORY WILL NOT ABSOLVE US

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE HISTORY OF THE WUO

Introduction

We are former members of the Weather Underground Organization (WUO) who believe that the historical view of that organization currently being put forward, in particular by the Revolutionary Committee, is incorrect. We believe that through self-conscious distortions, omissions and lies they are attempting to justify continuing on a dangerous and white supremacist path. The fact that dozens of pages have been written claiming to "expose" and "rectify" past errors of the WUO does not change this present reality. We have no disagreement with the necessity of the WUO's dissolution. The politics of the political journal, "Osawatomie," and the obvious inactivity of the organization on an armed level offer proof that it had made itself irrelevant and, in fact, had reached the point where very little could be salvaged.

We feel that the impact that our organization had on the revolutionary movement in this country was very destructive and, in fact, set the whole struggle back. The damage is somewhat obvious and somewhat still hidden. We write another history of the organization because we disagree with the RC and feel that they are repeating old errors on a higher level. If we are really to overturn the opportunism and corrupt politics that characterized the WUO for many years, root out and defeat the white supremacist self-protection and complete denial of the existence of male supremacy, we must dig deeper and get to the root of the errors.

The purpose of this history is not to vilify or rehabilitate individuals. Rather, it is because of the present-day struggle over the direction of the revolutionary movement in general and the relationship of white people to this movement in particular that we are writing this. We believe that the fact that in this period a significant number of fugitives have turned themselves into the authorities, even though there may have been different individual reasons for doing so, continues the view that white people don't have to fight and can make some sort of detente with the state on the basis of white privilege. The state's response of low or no bails and extremely light sentences is in stark contrast to the treatment of Third World revolutionaries as, for example, the jailing of Puerto Rican and Chicano activists around the FALN "investigations." White revolutionaries can never ignore this reality in choosing our tactics.

We have a continuing commitment to carrying out all levels of struggle necessary to concretely support national liberation struggles and defeat US imperialism. We reject the characterization, published in some of the movement press, that brands white people concretely engaging in armed struggle as terrorism.

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In some of the struggles described we took correct positions, in other we did not. Overall, we take responsibility for our own role-- when we talk about the organization we are talking about ourselves. Our practice in the present and future ultimately will show what we ourselves have learned from the past.

#### I HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

In all of the documents released by the RC published in "The Split in the WUO" as well as in articles published by the Bay Area PFOC in the journal "Breakthrough" there is one consistent point put forward about the history of the WUO-- i.e. that the book, Prairie Fire represented the high point of the WUO's revolutionary anti-imperialist politics and that it is these politics that have to be reclaimed. In the "Breakthrough" article, "In Defense of Prairie Fire" it says that "for two years, the WUO has pursued a wrong direction," that it has abandoned the politics of Prairie Fire, "the correct politics that guided the organization from 1969-1974." Similarly, the tape from Bernardine Dohrn speaks of the "tremendous struggle" necessary to overturn her politics and leadership "since the reversal of Prairie Fire." The RC stakes its claim to its current leadership on the fact that it has reclaimed "the revolutionary anti-imperialism of the book Prairie Fire."

We disagree with this view. Prairie fire neither represents the pinnacle of the WUO's revolutionary politics, nor can one explain the last two years of the organization's history as a reversal or overthrowing of the book. Before discussing the book itself we would like to focus on some of the major events in the earlier history of the WUO to illustrate our point.

#### The Townhouse to the Writing of Prairie Fire

The explosion at the Townhouse and the surrounding time period marks the beginning of public acts of armed struggle by the WUO. The common view in the movement is that in this period we committed "the military error," placing military action at the center and repudiating mass struggle. This, in fact, is the line put forward in the "New Morning" statement put out by the WUO in December 1970. While claiming to repudiate this view the RC basically perpetuates it by failing to correctly identify the real errors of this period.

We believe that the Townhouse represented an error in our class stand stemming from white supremacist and male supremacist politics. We entered that period with a correct view of the necessity for armed struggle as a rejection of the revisionism and gradualism of most of the white left. This was based in our understanding that the national liberation struggles, and not white people, were defining what was the necessary level of struggle. Nevertheless, we still placed ourselves as white people, in the center.

This was manifested in a number of different ways. First, we decided that we knew what was the best strategy for organizing

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white people, which in the early period meant a rejection of mass struggle. This was based in our view of ourselves as "exceptional" white people, some of the few who were capable of grasping anti-imperialism and who would be willing to "give up" our privileges to join the struggle. This view might have, at least, been understandable if it weren't for the fact that this period was a high point of mass anti-imperialist activity. We were objectively not the only white people actively supporting the Vietnamese and Black liberation struggles-- the demonstrations at the Justice Department in Washington, D.C. in November, 1969 and in New Haven in support of the Panthers; the work in the GI movement; as well as literally hundreds of attacks on ROTC buildings and military recruiting stations are just a few examples of such activity. White people were moved by the Vietnamese, the Black liberation struggle in general and the Black Panther Party in particular. Because we did not recognize the overall leadership of the national liberation struggles we did not see ourselves as part of a larger movement of white people.

This in turn came from a racist, sexist and petit-bourgeois world view. You just have to look at our glorification of the Charles Manson gang, in particular, the elevating to the level of revolutionary activity of white men committing ritual murders of pregnant women to see this in practice. We made violence the issue despite the fact that violence committed by white people outside the context of support for national liberation and anti-imperialism is bound to be racist and sexist.

Secondly, our view of women's liberation and the level of sexism in the organization meant that women were coerced into actions in the Townhouse period. The level of violence against women in the organization was high-- women were raped, browbeaten and bullied-- and support for women's liberation was reduced to the necessity for women to be fighters. Consequently, questions that women raised about the relationship of armed to mass struggle, about the targets of our actions as well as the method of armed struggle were ignored. This is not to say that women in the organization had the correct line, but women did question our view that we were the only white people who were willing to fight, and tried to argue that a material basis existed under imperialism for white women to ally with the national liberation struggles. Women further argued that our actions needed to address this in order to build such an alliance. Questions that were raised came primarily from the fact that this was a period of high tide in the women's liberation movement. We saw with our own eyes thousands of women joining the struggle, militantly challenging male supremacy in many forms. While Black women in particular and Third World people in general waged a struggle with the women's movement to understand the primacy of supporting national liberation struggles as the basis for waging the struggle for women's liberation, the WUO responded to this movement by putting forward hippie life styles and youth culture as the basis of white people's "revolution." This was a profoundly racist view which also completely wiped out women's oppression and the women's liberation movement.

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What have been the consequences of identifying the Townhouse as "the military error"? The most serious consequence was the rejection of armed struggle itself. We made heroes out of the three people who die, talking continually of their "sacrifice," while at the same time blaming them for the Townhouse explosion. The conclusion of this was to say that it was an error to lose people in the struggle, the result of being "too much into armed struggle." Following this line, the organization began to define party-building as its primary task. While not developed as a theory for a number of years, the practice of the organization unequivocally reflected this.

One manifestation of this was that our concern for the actions we did centered less and less around how they aided or fit into the strategy of the national liberation struggles, and more and more around how they could build a base for us. Concretely, we did fewer actions which attacked cops, despite the fact that the Black liberation struggle was intensifying its attacks on the state and was, in turn, facing severe police repression. We justified this on the basis that such actions would have heightened police repression against us! In the movement we led a line rejecting George Jackson's analysis of the state. In 1969 we had refused to join the Panther-initiated and led United Front Against Fascism, saying it was "revisionist." Later, we said that Black people were not facing fascism, only "heightened repression," and that Blood in my Eye was too "militaristic." We made no qualitative distinction between how the state affected white people and Third World people.

This became generally developed into a position on not doing actions that were dangerous or would "alienate people." The "New Morning" statement is a good example of the theoretical development of this view, but it is not isolated from the whole theory and practice of this period.

While the RC has finally made a self-criticism of the fact that the organization never responded to the Panther 21 criticism of "New Morning" in which they said we were abandoning armed struggle, they offer no explanation for why this was done. While we claimed that we didn't want to "get involved" in the split in the Panthers, the real reason that no response was made was precisely because "New Morning" was not just an isolated statement that could be "corrected." To acknowledge the Panther 21 criticism would have meant an examination of our entire political direction and practice. We would have had to publically and politically argue against them or really change. Instead, we chose to dismiss them out of hand and continue on our chosen path.

There are a couple of examples of the further development in practice of this line which are important to understand as a context for the appearance of Prairie Fire. One is the action the WUO did in New York City after the murder of Clifford Glover (a pig car in the parking lot of Shea's precinct-- Shea was the cop who shot the 10 year old Black child-- was bombed). Masses

of Black people protested this killing, and clandestine Black groups, in particular the Black Liberation Army (BLA) took specific steps to retaliate for this and other equally outrageous acts of police brutality. There was a war going on in Black communities and the BLA was the object of a massive police hunt. Our action did not speak to this reality. We needed to give some concrete aid and try to take the heat off of the BLA. Instead we did an action to take the heat off of ourselves-- i.e. the action was only done over the objections of the leadership because of an intense struggle by people in the organization and political pressure from outside. And then, it was a minimal tokenistic action-- what we could do easily without taking any risks. Even this was criticized by the leadership because it showed support for the BLA and "alienated" people.

The second example was the organization's failure to take any action in response to the Christmas bombing of Vietnam. The base of the entire organization, particularly in the West Coast, argued for us to act. The leadership, which was together for a central committee meeting at the time, refused. They argued against an action saying that the priority was to study and write-- that armed struggle was dangerous and liquidationist in that it jeopardized the organization, and that people were only arguing for action because they weren't into doing mass work! After the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements the organization issued the "Common Victories" communique, which the leadership hailed as a great step forward because we could now put out propaganda without doing an action with it. This communique about the Vietnamese victory also failed to mention anything about the Black liberation struggle or our commitment to continue fighting until all national liberation struggles were victorious. This was a public example of how we played the national liberation struggles off against each other, with the end result of exempting ourselves from responsibility to any of them.

The second major consequence of identifying the Townhouse as the "military error" is that the sexism inherent in and exposed by it were never fought against. Concretely, this meant that women in the organization were not taken more seriously, and in particular were not trained in military skills. Since the material basis of women's oppression had been liquidated, there was no basis for women to argue for a special relationship to getting skills or doing armed actions on their own. One example of this was that the role of Diana (the one woman who died in the Townhouse) and the other women in the collective were never allowed to be looked at apart from the men involved. This meant that the role of male supremacy in the Townhouse could only be looked at abstractly, and therefore needn't be taken seriously. Additionally, women's actions were not encouraged; they were given lip service support and left to be forgotten. And women who argued for the organization to do actions in support of the Black liberation struggle and the Vietnamese were termed irrational, emotional and subjective. The line that all of these specifics followed from was that male supremacy was not a material force in a revolutionary organization

made up of communists. So, if women were critical of the line or of the men in the organization it must at root be the problem of women. This line can be seen in its grossest form in the movie Underground where the struggle against male supremacy is declared to have been taken care of long ago by the women giving tender, loving care to the men. More of the history of the relationship of the WUO to women's struggles will be discussed later.

### Prairie Fire

The view put forward by the RC that Prairie Fire represents a decisive turning around of the "New Morning" period and represents the best anti-imperialist politics of the WUO is incorrect. The book did not change the political direction described above but, in fact, pushed it qualitatively further in the same direction.

For one thing, the writing, publication and distribution of the book was itself used as an argument against doing actions on the basis that we couldn't possibly do both, and the book was the priority. This stemmed from an analysis that the main problem with the organization was our lack of organization, and not white supremacy. For the WUO, Prairie Fire put party-building by white people as the main priority. While this line was not spelled out so clearly in the pages of the book, it was definitely being developed in practice by the organization.

The book was used to argue that the main role of the underground was to direct the mass movement, not to carry out armed struggle and other acts of solidarity. It was also used to critique Third World organizations, particularly the BLA, which didn't see as their main priority to put out similar treatises. These organizations were said to be "isolated" from the people and "unaccountable" because they didn't explain themselves and their actions. Furthermore, if they were facing severe repression with many cadre being killed or captured, it was their own fault, a result of political errors. Therefore, we had no responsibility as an organization to come to their aid. This was particularly significant since the book was used to raise a tremendous amount of money for the organization, money which was put back into the organization itself primarily to develop the resources necessary to publish "Osawatomie." The joke prevalent inside and outside the organization that we had turned into a publishing company was not far from the truth. In sum, the book was used by the leadership to resolve a political crisis in the organization without directly addressing the issues which had precipitated the crisis.

While it is not within the scope of this history to do a full critique of the politics of Prairie Fire, it is important to see the ways in which the line of the book is consistent with the practice of the organization. For one thing, the main way armed struggle is talked about is as something done by white people, in fact by the WUO, and as the basis for the WUO's leadership of the movement. Not only does this misname the leading forces in armed struggle who are Third World people, and take it out of the context of its strategic relationship to the national liberation struggles, but it also exemplifies the hegemonic approach to armed struggle which the WUO has so destruc-

tively developed. The arrogant view that we were the only white people capable of defining and carrying out this level of struggle seriously limited the ability of other white revolutionaries to develop practice in armed struggle over the last eight years.

Prairie Fire states that imperialism is one system, inseparable at home and abroad. Yet the "Homefront" section is completely separated from the struggle against imperialism. At an organizational school for cadre held after the publication of the book, this line was clarified as "the anti-imperialist struggle is the main struggle abroad and the anti-capitalist struggle is the main one at home." This view separates the national liberation struggles inside the borders of the US from their closest allies, national liberation struggles around the world. Another instance of this separation is the history section, which basically portrays the history of the US from the point of view of white people-- Third World peoples' struggles are "events" in the development of the dominant white nation.

And finally, from our point of view, the book does not have a revolutionary analysis of women's oppression. In fact, it is a self-justification and perpetuation of the organization's historic line on women, i.e. the women's movement is predominantly petit-bourgeois and reactionary, its only contributions being "cultural"; sexism is a question of institutions and not one of male privilege; men are not the enemy (they cannot stress this strongly enough); and women are a good constituency to organize because they are militant. The article "In Defense of Prairie Fire" agrees with the book's analysis of women as "super-exploited" workers who are also oppressed in all of the "institutions" of society including the family.

The book is also clearly insulting to gay people in general and lesbians in particular. It could not be otherwise since the only position on gay people developed in the organization since 1969 was on the "reactionary nature of the gay movement." Without an analysis of women's oppression which understands the key importance of women's unwaged labor in the family, it is not possible to understand the material basis of lesbian oppression. For all its rhetoric to the contrary, Prairie Fire reduces male supremacy and anti-gayness to "bad ideas." This is entirely consistent with the practice of the organization.

#### The Last Two Years

It is true, as is claimed by the RC, that it is possible to see two contending lines through much of the book Prairie Fire. There has always been struggle between contending lines in the history of the organization. The main thing about the period after the publication of the book, however, was not that the book was "overturned," but that it was implemented.

There was a consolidated position among the entire leadership that the main role of the organization was to lead the mass movement and to be engaged in party-building. Within this, there was a struggle over the best strategy. One road, which did become dominant, led to an opportunist view of the economic crisis based on an incorrect understanding of class struggle, and the attempt to form a multinational communist party. The other led to

building a white communist party which would ally with Third World forces. Both roads placed us, the WUO, at the center, not under the leadership of or accountable to the national liberation struggles. By this point any opposition within the organization with a revolutionary anti-imperialist perspective had been won over or smashed.

After the book came out we still did only one action a year; we continued the attacks on the SLA which were started before the publication of the book; we continued to pick and choose which organizations within the national liberation struggles we would support; we built manipulative and opportunist relationships with aboveground organizations; and we provided opportunist leadership for the whole mass movement through our publication "Osawatomie." This practice was a continuation of the direction the WUO had been moving in for many years. If Prairie Fire had really represented an overturning of this, it itself could not have possibly been so easily dismissed and so soon forgotten.

## II Why we believe that the history we have presented shows the development of white supremacist and male supremacist politics represented today by the RC

We believe that this history has shown what began as an organization whose dominant politics were to fight against the racism of most of the white left, and to argue in work and practice for internationalism, anti-imperialism and support for Black liberation turned into its opposite. Fundamentally this change took place because we saw national liberation struggles as separate from the proletarian revolution, and because we did not understand or follow in practice the leadership of Third World people. This white supremacist error led to the dominant position of seeing ourselves, the WUO, white people, as the center, on which basis we denied material aid and concrete support to national liberation.

We believe that the RC is continuing these politics. In publishing its "self-criticisms" it has betrayed the confidences of Third World comrades and the integrity of Third World organizations, as well as white revolutionaries who are working in support of these struggles, and exposed all this to the state. The publication of "The Split in the WUO" by the John Brown Book Club after criticism from Third World comrades compounds this racist error. Publishing the criticism from the Native American Warriors without any response is both a rip-off of the Native American struggle and a classic example of the "we know what's best" philosophy of the old WUO.

By actively putting forward a distorted and untrue history, and doing so in the name of "exposing opportunism," the RC is laying the basis to continue the politics of the WUO. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the view put forward of the history of women's struggles within the organization. The true history on this question is particularly important because if there had ever been the possibility of overturning the opportunist path of the organization, it would have had to come from an uprising of women.

The RC's women's history (called a "Letter from the Sisters

*in the WUO")* is distorted and untrue in a number of ways. For one thing, they minimize or leave out what actually happened. There was real violence committed against women. Women and gay people were purged every time they fought for anti-sexist politics. All criticisms of men in the organization for male supremacy were characterized as anti-communist. After the initial struggle to organize women's leadership was defeated in 1969 the question was never again seriously on the agenda. After an early infatuation with "communal living" and "free love" (which were horribly oppressive to women) heterosexual couples and nuclear family situations were practiced and held up as ideals.

Interestingly, in the RC's history the role of men in oppressing women and developing our line is left out. The male leaders were the leading sexists who fought tooth-and-nail to maintain their domination. They used theoretical and military skills as weapons against women while demanding to be recognized as men who were "different." The male leadership never recognized the women's question as a legitimate issue for struggle and they led in defining the women's movement as dangerous and reactionary. Criticisms of straight men by gay men in the organization were not tolerated and gay men were ridiculed.

Similarly, women in the organization were not given any real responsibility for what happened. In truth, women's alliances with male supremacy were critical. Male supremacy was able to maintain its power by women smashing other women, and by women using heterosexual privilege. After a national women's action in Pittsburgh in 1969, Bernardine Dohrn, the only woman in leadership at that time, led in smashing a woman's initiative and in purging women who had favored it. Even earlier than this she had led in fighting to deny any support to the women's movement. This set the pattern for any woman in the organization who wanted to gain favor and leadership positions to do so on the basis of allying with men and smashing women.

At the time the final draft before publication of the women's section of Prairie Fire was written, it said nothing about support for lesbians and gay men. The section had been written by straight women. A paragraph written at the last minute by a lesbian was changed around and put under the ridiculous heading of "Women liking women" without consulting any lesbians. Women's initiatives, whether around actions; internal debate and development of our line on women's liberation; or criticism of men in the organization were always viewed as evidence of a rising danger of "separatism" in the organization. The RC history still talks about the "separatist" tendency in these women's struggles, although allowing that they weren't dominant.

Their entire history promotes a false view of the organization's relationship to the women's movement. All of our internal struggles over the women's question had their roots in struggles led by the women's movement. This fact is never recognized. Rather, the RC claims credit for participation in and leadership of mass woman's

struggles that the WUO either had nothing to do with or actively opposed. Armed struggle, in particular the HEW action, was used as another way to wipe out the women's movement. This action promoted a line which argued leaping over the women's movement to reach "the masses;" liquidated male supremacy by defining every aspect of women's oppression in terms of institutionalized sexism; and in an arrogant, racist manner defined the "multinational women's movement" as leading. At the same time, the organization led attacks on leaders in the revolutionary women's movement, particularly by characterizing these women as anti-male and by lesbian baiting.

### III Conclusion

As we stated at the outset, we do not believe that the propagation of the lies and distortions about the history of the WUO by the RC is accidental. People engaged in all sides of the revolutionary struggle understand that history is a powerful weapon. The history of our movement is no exception. We cannot ignore or dismiss the particular history of one of the few organized attempts by white people in the US to put revolutionary politics into practice. It is our responsibility to learn from that history, to be ruthlessly honest about the errors that were made, about why the organization failed in every sense to fulfill the historical role it needed to play. We do not have the luxury of amking these errors a second time. When the RC promotes its view of the history of the WUO, they are asking the national liberation struggles, white revolutionaries and the movements of oppressed people to allow this history to repeat itself. As people who have lived through this once and who fully share in the responsibility for its consequences we cannot and will not allow this to go unchallenged.

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